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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKISH GOVERNMENT CRITICIZES DECISION TO CENSOR
DARWIN

11. (SBU) Summary and comment: Fierce reaction to the recent decision of the Turkish Scientific and Technological Studies Institution (TUBITAK) to pull a planned cover story about Charles Darwin has led GOT officials to speak out against the decision. Following a protest organized by the University Councils Association in front of TUBITAK offices, where demonstrators chanted, "Stop the enemies of science," and "AKP withdraw your hand from science," as well as criticism by politicians and civil society that the decision smacked of blatant censorship, Parliament Speaker Koksak Toptan and State Minister Mehmet Aydin issued sharp public rebukes to TUBITAK. A wide array of our contacts believe the incident is a direct result of ongoing efforts by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to place its loyalists in leadership positions in nominally independent bodies, including the Radio and Television Monitoring Board (RTUK) and Higher Education Council (YOK). Although pulling the Darwin story is a stain on TUBITAK's reputation, the quick reaction of two senior GOT leaders demonstrates the growing ability of civil society to affect the government, and the continuing pragmatism of AKP. End summary and comment.

Darwin Censored

12. (U) The Turkish Scientific and Technological Studies Institution (TUBITAK) attracted headlines March 11 after its 14-member Scientific and Technological Research Council vetoed a planned cover story about Charles Darwin for the March issue of its respected "Information and Technology" magazine. Turkish press reported that TUBITAK's editor-in-chief Dr. Cigdem Atakuman had planned the Darwin cover story to commemorate Darwin's 200-year birthday and UNESCO's declaration of 2009 as the "Year of Darwin." When TUBITAK Vice President Professor Omer Cegbeci learned of the project, he reportedly replaced the cover story with one about global warming, and removed Atakuman from her senior editorial job.

Outcry Against Decision

13. (U) Reaction from politicians, academia, and civil society was immediate and strong. Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) filed a parliamentary motion to censure TUBITAK that asked, "Isn't it a kind of censorship

to intervene? How was the decision made?" The University Councils Association organized a March 11 demonstration in front of TUBITAK's Ankara office, across the street from the Embassy. About one hundred demonstrators chanted, "Stop the enemies of science," and "AKP withdraw your hand from science." The group claimed to reporters covering the event that a pro-Fethullah Gulen mindset had infiltrated the government and state institutions. The Chamber of Electrical Engineer's released a statement reading, "freedom is about more than freedom to exercise your religion and faith."

14. (U) "Milliyet's" Semih Idiz called the move "stunning and unacceptable censorship," and wrote sarcastically that it would now come as no surprise if TUBITAK banned discussions of Galileo and Copernicus. Turkish daily, "Zaman," known for close ties to the government, downplayed the incident by writing that Atakuman decided on her own to circumvent already agreed upon plans to devote the March cover to global warming.

Government Responds

15. (U) Late March 11, Parliament Speaker Koksak Toptan, speaking to reporters, said suppressing Darwin was the wrong decision, and said TUBITAK should have been "more sensitive on the issue." Speaking March 11 at the opening of TUBITAK's Aegean research and development day in Izmir, State Minister Mehmet Aydin said, "You cannot censor such a renowned scientist. This is not TUBITAK's mission." Aydin also said that TUBITAK had assured him that Atakuman was not removed

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from her editor-in-chief post. TUBITAK President Huket Yetis was present at the opening but did not answer questions on the issue. Neither Cebeci nor Atakuman have responded to any press inquiries.

Creeping Politicization

16. (SBU) Many believe the incident demonstrates that TUBITAK, a nominally independent institution, has become deeply politicized following President Gul's 2007 appointment of its current President Nuket Yetis, and August 2008 amendments to its charter that gave the PM the right to select 7 members of the 14-member board. "Hurriyet's" Yusuf Kanli wrote, "Ever since AKP came to power, like all other government agencies, gradually TUBITAK was occupied with people with almond mustaches on their faces or in their heads, scientific independence was brushed aside, and independent-minded people employed there were encouraged to leave." METU Professor Aykan Erdemir likened the politicization of the nominally independent body to "AKP's steady takeover of once strongly secular Higher Education Council (YOK), the Radio and Television Monitoring Board (RTUK) and other nominally independent government bodies."

17. (SBU) Several contacts decried the censorship but praised the GOT's quick response. Human rights activist Orhan Kemal Cengiz called TUBITAK's move "blatant censorship" but said he was consoled somewhat by Speaker Toptan's and State Minister Aydin's quick response. EU poloff Sema Kilicer told us that she is skeptical that the government's response will quell the growing support for creationism in Turkey, evidenced by the immense and still growing popularity of Adnan Oktar - a religious sect leader who promotes intelligent design in Turkey and worldwide, and who has filed numerous lawsuits in Turkey against his opponents, resulting in court orders to shut down prominent websites, such as YouTube and Word Press.

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Jeffrey